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Legitimacy: Man's Search for Meaning

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LEGITIMACY: MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

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> Nothing here is done without taking
> thought, said the Mayor...(p. 80)

I do not claim to know the mind of Franz Kafka. Too many scholars before me, with more years and more knowledge, have already delved into his mind and come up with their own theories concerning what he meant by writing such-and-such a passage. What I do claim to have is an interpretation of his novel *The Castle,* such as a first-time reader like myself can assume.

There is nothing more frustrating to a parent than a child's continual cry of "why?" No matter what answer is given, the "why?" is repeated until the parent gives up trying to answer or the child tires. Yet the question of "why?" still remains.

It seems that man has always been asking "why?" In response, he has invented such methods as religion, philosophy, and science. And yet the question continues to nag at him until he has two choices left: to accept the reasons he has constructed, or to accept that there is no other answer than "because" and go on from there.

No one in *The Castle* can simply accept "because" as the answer. The villagers are constantly racing around with their "Klamm did this" and "Sortini said that." They believe that they cannot exist without an answer to why they are there, otherwise known as certification, but there is a question of what certification entails. In my mind, not only is there a question of what, for example, certain letters meant, such as the one to Amalia (pp. 249-250) and the one to K. from Klamm (p. 30), but whether they were actually written by Sortini and Klamm at all. The villagers point out that no one can really know the minds of men such as Klamm, but they are eager to claim that they know what was meant. In speaking to K. of the telephone system between the village and the Castle, the Mayor admits that one never knows who will answer at the other end, or

whether there will be anyone there at all. However, the Mayor points out:

> ...these telephone replies certainly have a meaning, why shouldn't they? How could a message given by an official from the Castle be unimportant? (pp. 94-95)

No one in the village will even suggest that anything the Castle does or says is meaningless.

Into their midst arrives K., an outsider. It is K. who questions the meanings and explanations that the villagers have for the actions of the Castle. It is K. who breaks the rules by which they have lived under the shadow of the Castle. And yet K. cannot accept the fact that there may not be any meaning in the Castle's actions. Instead, he looks for a different answer: justice. "I don't want any act of favor from the Castle, but my rights," he declares (p.96), and he sets out to get what he believes is his without questioning whether he actually has any right or not. But without his insistence that there must be justice, K. has no way to prove his legitimacy, his certification. And the need for legitimization stems from the eternal question "why?": "Why am I here?"

Thus no one, not even K., seems willing to accept the absence of an answer. K. is a hero, however; for unlike the villagers who accept all their rules and explanations as true and therefore unchangeable, K. seeks to change, and even disbelieve, these things. He will not go so far as to deny the Castle's right to authority, but he will challenge the villagers' expectations of what he "must" do. It is this struggle that makes him a modern hero.

In *The Castle,* the name of the highest authority in the land, the man whom no villager has ever seen, is Count Westwest. (p. 4) This name seems to be a pun, though whether Kafka intended it to be so or not is unknown to me.

"Westwest" seems to imply "west of west." It is in the far west that the sun supposedly sets. But, after all, the sun never actually sets anywhere, since the world is round; while the sun disappears from one spot it reappears at another.

This circular movement mocks the circular thinking of the villagers. While they are so eager for their actions to be legitimized by the Castle, they in turn legitimize the Castle by insisting that its actions have meaning. Meaning grants legitimization, and since the Castle, and the villagers, have not really given K. a meaning for who he is and what his place is, K. is not legitimized.

Legitimacy, like the western horizon, is determined by perception. That is all that meaning is: perception. The sun never sets, except in the human mind.

> There are only control authorities. Frankly, it isn't their function to hunt out errors in the vulgar sense, for errors don't happen, and even when once in a while an error does happen, as in your case, who can say finally that it's an error? (The Mayor p. 84)

The villagers, as mentioned above, are loathe to admit that there can be an error committed by the Castle. Even an "error" has an explanation; it must mean something. The Mayor takes fourteen pages (pp. 77-90) to explain how the Castle has handled K.'s case, and even then there is no real proof that that is what happened at all. But rather than admit that K. could be right, the Mayor, Gardena, and the other villagers insist that he is wrong. To admit anything else would be folly, for that would be saying that the Castle is wrong. And it is much easier to blame the victim than to blame the authority that victimizes.

Especially in this story, however, we do not even know if it is the authority that is victimizing. The Castle's power is only as great as the villagers' belief in its existence. It would seem then that K. is being victimized by the villagers' "explanations" that keep K. from realizing his goal.

Therefore, it is once again the insistence on meaning, on an answer other than "because," that keeps K. from achieving legitimization. Conflicts between K. and the villagers, and even between the villagers themselves, arise from struggles to prove which meaning is the genuine one. And there is no resolution because the Castle never declares what it genuinely means.

The struggle for power, for genuine meaning, is the villagers' and K.'s defense against an absurd world. Their search for answers in an answerless world is an attempt to order their lives into something that they can control. Although they would claim that the ultimate control lies in the Castle, it is they who invest the Castle with the idea that it controls.

The Castle itself is absurd. The idea of offices beyond offices beyond offices, with officials doing their small bit without really knowing what they are doing is crazy. The telephone messages, with everyone from Sortini to the smallest clerk answering, and replies from humming to snatches of conversation sound reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland.* Yet it is these absurdities and more for which the villagers are ready to find rational explanations.

The method of distributing files in the early morning hours at the inn is another example of absurdity. (pp. 356-364) Servants peering out of transoms, comparing the heaps of files outside of doors to see whose is the biggest, and therefore the most important, the games played between the file distributor and the servants to get back incorrect files: all this is rather humorous to the reader. But to those concerned, it is deadly serious.

For the characters in *The Castle,* life is certainly not a game. Life is full of answers, just waiting to be discovered by those who are legitimized.

In Kafka's book, legitimization is the key word. Words, thoughts, actions, even people, are only legitimate if they have meaning. Meaning, however, can only be attributed to these by the villagers and not the Castle, since the Castle *never* explains itself. Therefore, the villagers, and even K., are entrusting their status to a figurehead. The Castle has no more power to certify anyone than the amount of power these same people believe it has.

It is interesting to note that there have been many interpretations of Kafka's book as being an allegory of organized religion, or of the bureaucratic system. Yet both these institutions are only answers to the eternal question "why?" Just as the villagers have set themselves up a system of rules to explain their world, those who would ascribe bureaucracy and religion to *The Castle*'s world seem to me to be

missing the point.

The Castle is a picture of man's attempt to find reason in an absurd world. The more important question that should be considered here is why does man need to find meanings and explanations for everything around him. I believe he attempts to find reason because without something to order his life, all would turn to chaos. Man seems to be afraid of finding a void if he cannot find an answer to the question of "why?". This fear is mirrored in the philosophy of nihilism, of ultimate emptiness. It is ironic that man must establish a system of reasons to explain the possible void.

All page numbers refer to *The Castle* (definitive edition) by Franz Kafka with an homage by Thomas Mann, New York: Schocken Books, 1974

This paper is dedicated to Karen Schmitt, whose knowledge of the Germanic tongue aided in the formulation of certain ideas.